

Six Ways of Pairing Students in an ESL Classroom

By David Armour

I think it is useful to change the pairing or grouping of students for every activity in the ESL classroom. In general, I find that students who always work with the same partner become lazy and apathetic. Students get bored with the same routine. Students may also think the teacher is a little lazy if he or she doesn't take the time to change the class. While keeping the students in the same groups for a longer period of time does have its advantages (i.e. students feel comfortable with each other; it saves class time; etc.), the benefits of changing the grouping are much greater. A class that is always changing is more dynamic. If a student's group was dull the last time, the next group may be better. If the student's last group "charged him/her up", that student can pass that energy to the next group. I've noticed classes that I constantly change are more closely knit. Students become more familiar with each other and learn each other's personalities. And because they share ideas with the whole class and not just with the same old group, their discussions are richer and more interesting.

Changing pairings has another benefit-repetition. If a student has to practice a dialogue or language function over and over with the same classmate, that student will quickly lose interest, but if the student changes partners several times, each change will bring a fresh new try at the same dialogue. In a discussion, where a student has to give her/his answer to one classmate but didn't do such a great job, she/he will have another chance when the groups are changed.

Try changing the grouping during and after every activity for a week. I'm quite confident your students will respond well.

Here are some ideas for pairing students. Remember to keep your class dynamic and don't always use the same method of pairing them up.

1. Line drill: Good for dialogs, language functions, or short discussions. Have students stand in two lines facing each other. Periodically change the line and have them repeat with their new partner. N.B. If there is an odd number of students, the teacher can join or make one student a "teacher" to help correct his/her classmates' mistakes.

2. Circle drill: Also good for dialogs, language functions, or short discussions, this is similar to the line drill, but the format is different. If you have a large number of students, run more circles, while the inner circle stays still.

3. Fire drill: This is good for raising the excitement level of the class while working with dialogs and language functions. Have students sit paired in desks. Have enough desks for all but one or two students. The students without desks must stand. If they hear their classmates make a mistake, they can take that student's place. When the teacher says "fire!" all the students must change desks. Those students standing can try to get a seat too. Make sure that partners don't just

change seats. Tell them that is unacceptable and if they just switch seats, you will make them stand. A similar activity can be done in which the student who is standing has to carry on a dialogue with a broom. When the broom is dropped, the mad scramble for a seat begins.

4. Find the person who wrote the card: This is good for pair discussion. Give small scraps of paper to half of the students in the class. Tell them to write something on it—preferably something related to what you are covering in class. (For example, if you are talking about people, have the students write the most important person in their lives.) Collect the papers and redistribute them to the other half of the class. The students with the paper must find the person who wrote it by asking questions like "Who is the most important person in your life?" When they find the person, they must ask follow-up questions. Quiz the students to make sure they asked follow-up questions. Run the activity with these newly formed pairs.

5. Name lottery: This is good for pair discussion or long dialog practice. Pass out small scraps of paper to half the class. Have each student write his/her name on the paper. Collect the scraps and fan them out like a gambler or card dealer. Tell the other half of the class to take a scrap of paper in order to choose a partner. If a student doesn't know who the person is on his/her scrap paper, don't tell them, but have them find out by asking their classmates.

N. B., If you have an odd number of students, give one student two names and have them work in a group of three. The teacher may also participate, or one student can act as teacher and exchange places with another student after a period of time.

6. Numbers circle: Good for discussions or long dialogs. Have the students number off. Write a circle on the board using the numbers. Draw lines randomly between two numbers. Each student goes to his/her partner indicated by the arrows.

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